

A CHINA SHEPHERDESS

- - By Arthnr Carlton

THE brilliant hues of the dancers' dresses, varicolored as the feathers of a flock of African parrots, are reflected from the great shining mirrors, and swim over the surface of the polished parquet. Daylight has not yet come peeping through the blinds to show up the unreality, the tawdriness of the scene. Everything is gold, or as good as gold, that glitters just now, and Marie Stuart's bronze-powdered locks, black velvet and Roman pearls command as many adorers as her fair, frail prototype ever owned upon those gala nights at Holyrood. Heavens! what a jumble of periods! what an olla podrida of nations! what a mingling of nursery myths with historical legends does a fancy ball present. There is Queen Boadicea, with long red hair and golden torque, dancing with Myrtheer Von Dunk. Princess Pocahontas curvets it merrily with a troubadour of the Middle Ages. The Hungarian band alternately moans and clashes out a valise of the ultra-patetic, stormily passionate, Anglo-Teutonic type, whilst the dancers disport themselves cleverly or clumsily; the young men who "don't dance, don't you know," and the old ones, whose salutory days are over, support the dodo with their shoulders or lounge upon the landing, and the wallflowers sit in neat, ungarthered rows and try to look happy—poor "Mary Mary," whose silver bells have rung to no purpose as yet; poor "Little Miss Muffet," who would give her two pink ears if a monstrous great spider "of the black-legged, white-bosomed, human order would come and sit down beside her as preliminary to engaging her for the next dance. Dear me! why does a wallflower in fancy dress look so much more desolate than a wallflower in ordinary evening costume? And why is it that so many middle-aged fair ones are revolving whilst youth and beauty and freshness sits chained. Andromeda-like, by unbreakable bonds of propriety to a gilt chair?

So muses Halkett Cameron while he measures his six feet of stature

against a pedestal of Russian porphyry, and criticises his fellow creatures from behind the barrier of his folded arms. He is very well bred, and he is proud of it; he is very handsome, and he knows it. He is the terror of mothers who own portionless daughters; the secret dread of husbands who are the proprietors of flirting wives. He is next heir to a fine old title and a noble old property, most nobly encumbered by centuries of accumulated debts—of which last he has a good many of his own. He is steeped to the lips in embarrassments, and if something does not turn up must infallibly sell out and leave the Guards. Indeed, he sold a set of diamonds only last month that were returned to him—what an ass that little husband of the Highflyer's is!—and his pet steed-chaser fell into the hands of one of the tribe of Israel only last week. Society does not know this, however, and shall not while Halkett can prevent it. For as long as a man belongs to the best regiment and is a member of the best club and moves in the best circles and owes to the best tailor and is dunned by the best cigar merchant, he may be as poor as Job, but society will hardly be persuaded that he is on the verge of insolvency until the crash comes, and then society will be very much shocked.

"But it has come to this," mused Halkett, biting his yellow moustache, "that something has got to be done, or I shall go under. My name and my set and my—hang it!—my good looks have floated me up to this, but they won't much longer. If I can't raise money any other way I must sell myself, by Jove! Ah! there's Banksia. How diabolically handsome she looks!"

Lady Banksia Rose nodded to him across her partner's shoulder as she moved by. She was svelte in figure, and tall. She was lithe and leopard-like, and tawny of skin and feline yellow of eye. "Only wanted black spots to be perfect," some sneering cynic of her own sex had commented.

But Tooley Too—who does not know him?—had said that she was the Dolores of Swinburne over again, and the Greekest thing in

London. Greek or not, she was the regnant idol of a fast set, and Halkett Cameron had helped to forge the bonds that dragged him, with others, at the tail of her triumphant chariot—willingly enough.

And she smiles, a slow, sweet smile, as she passes her lover. The subtle odors of her garments envelop him, her strange yellow eyes burn into his blue ones in one brief glance. His name is down upon her card for the next dance. And in the meanwhile where is Lady Lucy?

Lady Lucy is coming towards him, on the arm of Sir Chauncy Bitt, the eminent Queen's Counsel. She is dressed as a china shepherdess, the poor little soul. She looks less plain to-night than she has ever looked. Her drab-colored hair is hidden under snowy powder; her invisible eyebrows are stippled up artfully with Indian ink. Her sallow little cheeks have a glow of artificial rose upon them, her insignificant little figure is made pretty by pannier and sacque. Diamonds glitter all over her, from the handle of her ribboned crook to the insteps of her neat little feet, from her gay stomacher to the topmost puff of her powdered head. Lady Lucy Firkin, only daughter and sole heiress of the great butter merchant who was made a peer in reward for his oleaginous services to his Government, is the richest young woman in England, if she is small and insignificant and plain. Let her be put into the scale with a round dozen of professional beauties, and their unmarketable graces will kick the beam against her more solid charms.

And she puts her small hand on Halkett Cameron's arm, and they dance away together. The turn is only a short one. He leads her into the conservatory by and by, and seats her in an Eden-like bower of palms, and prepares to say—what she knows is coming. For the past month she has expected it. Halkett Cameron was always a good actor. He has almost persuaded the plain, sensitive little heiress, "the nugget," as needy gold-hunters have christened her, that she has inspired him with a real passion.

"I am afraid to dance with you any longer," he says, with a soft, sentimental smile; "you are such a perfect little china shepherdess that I am afraid lest some clumsy blunderer should clip a corner off you, or smash you into infinitesimal atoms, you fragile little piece of Sevres." "Oh!" says Lady Lucy, with a nervous little laugh, "a broken bit of china is easy to replace." "Not if it is the only piece of its kind in the whole world," answers Halkett lazily, "or if the niche that has been made for it in the collector's cabinet will fit no other. While I watch over you, at least, no such risk shall be incurred. I am a true enthusiast. I would give my life," Halkett goes on, wondering at his own eloquence, "to preserve the treasure that is to make some richer man happy one of these days." Lady Lucy folds her little hands in her lap, and wonders demurely whether she is on earth or in heaven. The delectable voice goes on: "Let me have this one other dance, pray. Let us sit it out here together. It is a harder struggle than even I anticipated to part from you so soon."

"To part?" Lady Lucy turns wide, frightened eyes upon the god of her idolatry.

"Yes, I am going away," says Halkett. It has only just occurred to him. "Going to—Canada, to strike a blow for myself in the great battle of life. I was content to drift along with the tide, unthinking and unheeding, until—may I say it?—until it dawned upon me that I was playing an ignoble part. I have no prospects but such as are poor ones. But I have health and strength; I can work; and one day, perhaps, I shall be rich enough to have—can you guess what?"

Lady Lucy shakes her head.

"A china shepherdess of my own," whispers Halkett. "Ah me! I may have to wait and work for years; but I shall carry her image in my heart, and—why are you crying, dear Lucy?"

To which Lucy answered with a gulp: "Because you are—going away!"

"How red her little nose shows through the powder," thought Hal-

kett, but he said gravely that she knew that he must go, and why. Because he would never tell the woman he adored how madly he adored her—could never ask her to share his lot until he was so placed as to worldly circumstances that he could meet her on equal terms. To this end he would strive. And if time should bring her another lover whom her heart turned to more fondly—well!

"Never!—never! I never could love anybody but—but you. And what do I care for your worldly circumstances?" the impetuous little woman cried. "Rich or poor, you are all the world to me, Halkett. And oh! you know it!"

He knew, and knowing it he had no pity. He kissed her cheek and her hands, and called himself happy. Ah! how full the heart of the china shepherdess seemed. This great good had come to her that, in spite of her riches, a true man loved her for herself. The true man gave her into the charge of another and—went to look for Lady Banksia.

"Lady Lucy, you are ill, or faint!" said the man, who was a cousin of Halkett's—a plain, hard-working, literary man, whom society did not snub for the sake of his great connections, and because of his rising genius. He looked gravely on the poor little heiress. He knew Halkett thoroughly, and guessed.

"If I might sit down somewhere quietly by myself," said Lady Lucy in a childish voice. Her eyes were wide open and shining. She looked plain, because of the great rapture that had transfused her.

"I will go and get you an ice," said John Cameron, "and until I come back you shall rest here in this little nook by the fountain in the shadow of the water plants."

She smiled at him gratefully, and he went on his errand, and left her alone with her new bliss.

Broad leaves screened her from the radiance of the electric lamps. A marble nymph leaned by, with her finger to her lips; water gurgled by refreshingly. She dipped her hand into the marble basin of the fountain, and cooled her forehead with the sparkling drops.

And suddenly a voice—the one voice that had power to stir her heart—sounded close by. Halkett stood at the other side of the leafy screen. A woman was with him. Her face was plainly seen by Lady Lucy, though his was hidden—it was Lady Banksia, "The Climbing Rose," as sneering people called her, who remembered in boyhood a way she had begun her magnificent career. She had a coronet of diamonds and sapphires, and a zone of the same jewels. Her exquisite arms were bare, and in the light her sleepy eyes shone yellow as topaz.

"So the die is cast, the plunge has been made. Am I to congratulate or to weep with you, my friend?"

"Neither," said Halkett; "the thing was inevitable; it has come to pass. Let us both forget it, and be as we have been."

"Be as we have been!" How like a man! You give a woman a rival, and expect her to receive the news with complacency.

"A rival! Lady Lucy a rival, and of yours!" he laughed. "As well might a Scotch pebble hope to outshine a Brazilian emerald. And you know my heart and soul—if I have got one—they are yours. I adore you, as I always have and always will. It is a question of vulgar cash, this marriage. I want money dreadfully, so do you, so do most people; and here is an obliging little soul who has a great deal, and is ready to part with most of it for a few fine words and a kiss or two."

"You are really heartless, Halkett."

"Who taught me to be so? What heart I had I laid at your feet, and you have trodden the juice out of it until it is as dry as a stockfish. Ah! how handsome you look to-night; black always suited you."

"The color is especially appropriate just now."

They laughed, and through their laughter came the sound of a kiss. Then the music of the band burst out again triumphantly, and they went their way together.

"Lady—Lady Lucy—Can she have gone?"

"I am here," said a voice John

agreed it was not. Over fees she began to tell me about herself; her people had packed her over to Paris, and now she was coming back to London to be introduced to some horrible prospective husband.

"It is too bad—monstrous!" I said warmly. For some reason I hated the unknown man. "My dear girl, don't be influenced by parents."

"It isn't my parents—it's my sister," she interjected.

"It doesn't matter who it is," I rejoined. "Marry the man of your choice."

"Would you do so if you were a girl?"

"Most certainly," I said. "Now, my sister-in-law sent me to meet this Miss from the convent, hoping I should fall in love with her."

"Poor boy!—and you won't?"

"Not now, that I have met you."

Mam'selle Inconnue smiled. "Don't be absurd. You have known me—three hours."

"One can crowd a lifetime into three hours," I said ingenuously.

Mam'selle Inconnue ignored my remark. "I should like to meet this little convent girl," she said. "I wonder what she is like?"

"Ugly," I replied promptly. "At the awkward age—neither woman nor girl."

Mam'selle Inconnue smiled. She was essentially a dainty little woman. Presently she sighed.

"What is the matter?" I said.

"I must be going—just look at the time." She glanced at a gold bracelet watch.

"Are you so sorry to go?" I said.

She nodded. "I've enjoyed myself

immensely. It's been a great adventure."

"A great adventure?"

"Yes. I don't know what you must think of me! Idiotic words rose to my lips, but she stopped them with the flow of her conversation. "But I wanted to be really downright naughty for once."

"But you haven't been," I said. "You've only been very moderately naughty. Now, if we went to a theatre—I forgot, we should only see the last act."

"No," said Mam'selle Inconnue. "Then there is nothing for it but to see you home," said I.

It was not until we were in the street and a stout commissionaire had hailed a taxi. "You mustn't come any further," she said, "it would spoil everything."

"Then can't I meet you again?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows? London is not such a big place, is it. She smiled at me provokingly.

"I will find you again, if I have to walk every street. What address shall I tell the man to drive to?"

"No. 16, Ullswater Gardens," she answered.

I retained my senses sufficiently to tell the man. I hesitated, then, just as the taxi started, jumped inside.

"You are horrid," said Mam'selle Inconnue. "You must get out at once."

"No," I answered firmly. "I am going to 16, Ullswater Gardens with you."

"You can't do anything of the sort. Mam'selle Inconnue looked almost

tearful. "What will Betty say?"

Cameron hardly recognized.

"Great God!" he broke out, as the light fell upon that white drawn face. "What has happened?"

"Nothing," she said with a wan smile.

But he persisted. "You would not look as you look now if all were well with you. Ah! Lady Lucy, if you could only trust me! I am a nobody, as poor and insignificant as may well be, but I think I am worth trusting."

"If I would trust anybody it would be yourself. But I must bear the consequences of a great error, a blind piece of folly, in silence. And do not speak with contempt of poverty. Oh! if you only knew what a curse my riches have brought on me. Now please take me to my carriage, and tell the Duchess that I have gone home with a headache."

As they emerged from the hot glare of the house into the coolness of the night a lane of grimy London stragglers opened to let them pass, and closed again behind them.

"My!" cried a shrill voice, "just look at the diamonds. Law's a me! Shouldn't I just be 'appy if I was 'er?"

Lady Lucy turned with a sudden impulse, and dropped a plain little gold bracelet into the girl's eager hand.

"My child," she said gently, "think before you wish that wish again. Have you a mother who loves you?"

"Yus, and a good 'un, if she is only a char-woman."

"And perhaps you have—a sweet-heart, who you—anything else that you have got?"

"Aye! There's Jim," said the little grimy face, lighting up proudly "and he's as true as steel."

"Mother and lover—and I have neither. Remember that, next time you wish to change with me—remember."

The white face gleamed on John Cameron for an instant. Lady Lucy smiled, a smile more pitiful than tears, and the carriage rolled away.

Only a broken china shepherdess. Only a heart gathered, crushed and stricken to death. Such things happen every day.

FIVE-THIRTY AT CHARING CROSS

- - By J. T. Stevens

"IT'S awfully sweet of you to come—and now you'll go, won't you?"

I must confess I felt surprised. I am used to my sister-in-law's peculiarities, but this last was somewhat beyond me.

"Go where?" I asked.

"To Charing Cross to meet Grace."

"Who is Grace?" I asked.

Betty surveyed me severely. "Did you read my letter?"

"Of course. As a result, here I am."

"And yet you ask me who Grace is?"

Open confession is good for the soul. "To be honest, I read three lines—the three in which you invited me here. That was enough—I seized my hat and came."

Betty beamed and rang the bell. "You will just have time for a cup of tea, then a taxi to Charing Cross."

"First," I said, "what is Grace like?"

"Adorable."

"I think you said she had spent three years at a convent school."

Betty smiled ingenuously. "I spent four."

I collapsed.

"I have told her to wear a red carnation, so you can't miss her."

"No," I answered gloomily, "I can't miss her."

Betty gave me an encouraging little pat on the back when I left. "I hope you'll enjoy yourself," she said; "and, mind, dinner at seven-thirty."

I said nothing. Betty is idiotic at times. Did any one ever enjoy him-

self at Charing Cross?

The station was packed; it always is when I go there. When the train came in I stood at the barrier and watched the passengers. I waited until the last had gone, and the ticket collector looked at me inquiringly, but there was no sign of a prim and proper young lady with a red carnation. I turned away wearily.

The platform was emptying. I began to anatomize Charing Cross and young ladies who come from convent schools, when my eyes fell upon a little lady standing in the middle of the station and looking around as if for someone. It wasn't Grace—oh, dear, no, but a very pretty, stylish little Parisian lady, exquisitely gowned.

I covertly watched her for a couple of minutes, then crossed to her side. "Can I be of any assistance?" I ventured to ask.

She regarded me for a moment carefully. "I was looking for the tea-room," she said.

"And so was I," I suggested brightly. "Shall we look together? Charing Cross is such an awful place. I shall get lost."

"Were you looking on the platform?" she asked. Albeit there was a twinkle in her eyes, she looked at me demurely.

"I was just going to," I answered. Strange, but we both walked directly across to the tea-room.

"Have you been looking long?" she asked, as I held open the door.

"For twenty-five years," I responded.

She raised her eyes. "For the tea-room? You must be hungry."

"No," I answered; "not for the tea-room."

"I left it at that, and selected a table apart from the others."

It was over tea that I made my confession. She had just told me that she had come direct from Paris. "I have been looking for a young lady who has spent three years in a convent at some unpronounceable place, and I have missed her."

"Poor dear."

I smiled. "Thank you," I said.

"I meant the poor girl, not you."

"Oh!" I felt disappointed. "And I have to take her back to my sister-in-law's in time for dinner at seven-thirty. What shall I do?"

"Drink your tea, or it will get cold."

"I shall have to go to the lost-property office presently," I said.

The girl smiled. "Shall I pour you out another cup?" she suggested.

"Please," I said. I did everything possible to prolong the meal. I think I succeeded fairly well. It was a quarter to seven when she said she must go.

Desperation seized me. Betty, seven-thirty dinner, young ladies from convent, were scattered to the four winds. "Look here," I said, "let's go and have dinner somewhere."

She looked at me, surprised, and drew herself up. "I'm afraid not. As a matter of fact, I have some one waiting for me somewhere on the platform."

"He won't have waited all this time," I said. "You'd like to come, wouldn't you?"

"It's horribly irregular," she expostulated.

"Everything's horribly irregular to-day. The train even was only half an hour late."

"And you missed your friend."

"And there are heaps of taxis waiting," I said.

"But your sister-in-law is waiting too," she rejoined.

"I haven't got back without my little convent lady," I said. "It would be more than my life was worth. I shall be hanged for a lamb—let's make it a sheep. You'd like to come?"

She hesitated. I remembered reading somewhere that she who hesitates is lost. "That settles it," I said. "I know a delightful little restaurant."

She chatted on the way in delightful English with all the charm of the Parisienne. London, lighted up, delighted her. "You have been here before?" I said.

She smiled at me. "I was born in England," she said; "and, oh, I love dear old London!"

Not for worlds would I divulge the name of the restaurant where I took her. It is a delightful little place, where the waiters are fatherly and English. There is a sufficient spice of naughtiness to make it interesting. Its customers are the same, year in, year out.

The waiters bowed and smiled as she sailed up the restaurant with me.

We chose a secluded table.

Mam'selle Inconnue was an epicurean; she was also a delightful conversationalist—and it is not easy to be both at one and the same time.

"Yes," she said, over the soup; "I love Paris, but it is not London."

"I agreed it was not."

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